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JAPAN AND THE GLOBAL REFUGEE PROBLEM

Summary

The recent plight of Kurdish refugees fleeing Iraq after the Persian Gulf War refocused international attention on the plight of people displaced by persecution. The Kurds' despair caught the attention of the Japanese, who have responded more quickly than in the days following the fall of Saigon in 1975 when Tokyo drew criticism for its lack of attention to the surge of refugees from Vietnam. Now Japan is a country of initial asylum for refugees as well as a resettlement site. Its most significant contribution to the Kurdish situation as well as that of other refugees has been substantial financial support to international refugee organizations.

Yet many aid experts contend that Japan is not doing enough to resolve the refugee problem. The recent appointment of a Japanese human rights expert to serve as United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is expected to direct more attention in Japan to the refugee problem as well as draw additional financial commitments from Tokyo for refugee relief. An often-heard refrain from refugee experts is that Japan needs to contribute more than money toward easing the overwhelming needs of refugees. Observers suggest that Japan could improve its performance in this area by allowing more refugees to resettle in the country and by making available greater personnel resources.

Background

Conflict and repression have driven people from their home countries in record numbers in recent years. The United Nations considers people with a

"well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion" to be refugees. By the end of 1989 their worldwide number had grown to more than 15 million, up from 8 million in 1980. Although some recent political developments have promised to address certain causes of refugee movement, including the democratization of parts of Eastern Europe and Latin America, continuing unrest elsewhere has forced massive numbers of people to leave such disparate countries as Afghanistan, Vietnam, Sudan and Iraq. Relief experts say that by mid-1991 the refugee population around the world was nearing 17 million.

Refugee resettlement and relief efforts expanded worldwide in the days following the Vietnam War as governments shared responsibility for those fleeing repression. Japan, which did not allow permanent refugee resettlement prior to 1979, took a very different path than countries with a long tradition of integrating refugees, such as the United States, Australia and Canada. While problems of population density and limited space constrained Japan's ability to accept refugees, cultural and political tenets also constituted barriers to refugee resettlement.

International pressure on Japan to assume greater responsibility for refugees has clashed with a homogeneous society traditionally considered closed to foreigners and reluctant to rely on or assist strangers. Moreover, in part because Japanese foreign policymakers adhered closely to the principle of non-intervention in other countries' domestic affairs, the government avoided human rights issues until the early 1980s, noted Sadako Ogata, the Japanese human rights expert appointed United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in December 1990.[1]

Refugees began to arrive in Japan in small numbers following the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, yet the government was slow to allow them to settle permanently, citing Japan's close-knit culture and space problems. The intensified rush of refugees from Vietnam and Cambodia in 1979 and the accompanying international appeals for assistance soon led Tokyo to formulate a new approach to the refugee problem. By the spring of 1979 the government had announced an eight-point program, which included: a target of accepting 500 Indochinese refugees for resettlement in the country; promises to provide language and vocational training facilities for refugees in Japan; and tentative pledges to make additional commitments to refugee relief. Disputes among various government agencies and divided public opinion stretched the diplomatic efforts of then Prime Minister Masayoshi Ohira and Foreign Minister Sunao Sonoda in working out this package.

Later that year the escalating number of Indochinese fleeing in sometimes rickety boats to neighboring countries set the backdrop for Tokyo's decision to boost financial contributions to international refugee programs and expand the conditions under which Japan would serve as a country of first asylum.

[1]Sadako Ogata, "Japan's United Nations Policy in the 1980s," Asian Survey, September 1987, p. 968.

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By doubling its contribution to UNHCR's General Assistance Program for Indochinese Refugees, Japan fulfilled a pledge to cover approximately half of the total cost of the program. Tokyo also announced that it would allow boat people temporary refuge without requiring a guarantee of acceptance from the governments of rescuing ships. Critics, however, continued to characterize Japan's resettlement quota as meager compared to the efforts of other countries. Washington's policy in the spring of 1979 was to accept 7,000 Indochinese refugees a month for resettlement in the United States. In 1985 Tokyo raised its resettlement ceiling for Indochinese refugees to 10,000. The numbers granted asylum in Japan have yet to near that ceiling.

Japan's Framework for Refugee Relief

Japan has focused its refugee relief efforts on first asylum and resettlement measures and financial cooperation. To help bolster the government's response Tokyo has turned to nongovernmental organizations and, to a much larger extent, international groups, many of which are associated with the United Nations.

Policymaking - In 1977 the Japanese government began addressing issues raised by the Indochinese refugee situation through an interministerial body comprised of officials from agencies involved in refugee issues. Key policy decisions regarding refugees continue to involve the Ministries of Labor, Education, Justice, and Health and Welfare as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which has the lead. The Foreign Ministry's Human Rights and Refugee Division is responsible for overall refugee policy in the international context, while other agencies handle their specific areas of expertise. The Ministry of Justice, for example, deals with border functions, while the Ministry of Labor oversees employment training.

Nongovernmental Organizations - The Human Rights and Refugee Division also is responsible for coordinating with Japan's nongovernmental organizations on refugee issues. More than 40 NGOs in Japan currently work on refugee assistance. Many of these groups were established following the government's 1979 decision to allow refugee resettlement in Japan. One organization founded that year, the Foundation for the Welfare and Education of Asian People, received a government commission to help establish refugee resettlement centers. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has applauded NGO contributions to refugee relief and has indicated willingness to support their work. American aid experts note, however, that Japan still lacks the extensive involvement U.S. private voluntary organizations have in refugee relief in this country and overseas. They also point out that hands-on involvement by Japanese personnel is not as visible in terms of the work being done by refugee agencies outside the country.

Contributions to International Organizations - Although Tokyo has extended special bilateral assistance to Thailand, Pakistan and other countries offering shelter to refugees from neighboring regions, most of Japan's refugee assistance goes through international organizations. Japan is a big contributor to UNHCR as well as to other major organizations that work on behalf of refugees -- the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, the United Nations Border Relief Operations, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the International Organization for Migration.

Japan's contributions to international refugee organizations took a dramatic turn following Tokyo's 1979 decision to allow the resettlement of

refugees on Japanese soil. That year the government increased its contribution to UNHCR from the year-earlier level of $10 million to $65 million. Through 1989, the latest year for which complete data are available, Japan remained the second-largest single donor to UNHCR. Its 1989 contribution of nearly $73 million accounted for more than 14 percent of total contributions to that organization (see Table 1). In 1989 Japan also ranked as the second-largest single contributor to the U.N. Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East and was the top donor to the U.N. Border Relief Operations.

That same year Japan was the largest nonmember contributor to the International Organization for Migration, a Geneva-based international organization of 39 member governments. IOM works closely with UNHCR and NGOs; it also handles technical and legal aspects of the resettlement of refugees and migrants. Tokyo earmarked its 1990 contribution to IOM for activities that included language training in Thailand and Europe, placement of qualified Cambodian experts in Thailand and Cambodia, plus resettlement and repatriation assistance in Latin America. The Japanese government also has been involved in IOM work with Afghan refugees, including a program aimed at helping Afghans return to assist in that country's reconstruction. IOM also received funds last year from the Japan Shipbuilding Industry Foundation and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation for programs in Southeast Asia and Latin America. In addition, Japan provides direct food aid to refugees in places like Cambodia and Afghanistan and in Africa's poorest countries through such operations as the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization's World Food Program.

The Department of State's 1990 World Refugee Report noted that Japan's outlays to some of the major international refugee organizations jumped by more than a third between 1988 and 1989. Yet some critics contend that Japan's contributions in this area do not measure up, given its growing economic strength. Many observers expect that the late 1990 appointment of Ms. Ogata as UNHCR eventually will stimulate an increase in Japanese contributions to that financially troubled agency. Ms. Ogata has stressed that, in addition to directing more funding toward refugee programs, Japan must raise its level of participation. "The criticisms," she has said, "should be money, plus what; what else can Japan do?"[2]

Already the attention that Ms. Ogata has focused on the refugee issue among the Japanese is thought to have contributed to the unprecedented flood of private donations to UNHCR, largely to assist the Kurdish refugees. This spring Japanese citizens contributed $1.3 million to UNHCR; labor unions and religious groups added $2.2 million, and businesses donated $11.5 million. Ms. Ogata's prompting also reportedly was behind a relief fund established in April for victims of the Persian Gulf War. Support for the fund came from various Japanese industry groups, including Keidanren (Japan Federation of Economic Organizations) and Nikkeiren (Japan Federation of Employers' Associations), but included contributions from other organizations and citizens as well.

Aid experts differ in their assessments of how much UNHCR Ogata will be able to move her country toward accepting greater responsibility for refugee relief. While some believe she will heighten Japanese awareness of refugee

[2]Marcus Brauchli, "Ogata, New U.N. Head of Refugees, May Push Her Native Japan for More Aid," Wall Street Journal, February 11, 1991, p. A6B.

Table 1: Top Contributors to Major International Refugee Organizations, 1989

(in thousands of dollars)

Donor	Amount	Share of Total Contributions
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (General and Special Programs)		
United States	$125,762	24.9%
Japan	72,823	14.4
European Community*	41,906	8.3
West Germany	34,467	6.8
Sweden	32,137	6.3
Total	505,578	100.0
U.N. Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (General and Special Programs)		
United States	$61,300	30.0%
European Community*	45,145	22.1
Japan	16,122	7.9
Sweden	14,026	6.9
Italy	10,969	5.4
Total	204,301	100.0
U.N. Border Relief Operations		
Japan	$27,589	51.5%
United States	12,243	22.9
European Community*	4,012	7.5
Canada	2,553	4.8
France	1,401	2.6
Total	53,542	100.0
International Committee of the Red Cross		
Switzerland	$45,072	21.9%
United States	36,291	17.7
European Community*	25,762	12.5
Sweden	18,009	8.8
Japan	15,014	7.3
Total	205,671	100.0

International Organization for Migration

Member Governments		
West Germany	$9,468	32.3%
United States	6,398	21.9
Switzerland	1,428	4.9
Italy	1,310	4.5
Belgium	951	3.3
Other Donors		
Japan	$2,750	9.4
European Community*	1,898	6.5
UNHCR	169	0.6
Total	29,261	100.0

*In addition to EC members' individual contributions, joint EC funds are available for disaster and refugee relief.

Source: Department of State, World Refugee Report, September 1990.

problems, others contend that it could be extremely difficult to sway Japanese attitudes on this issue. Addressing Japanese reluctance to accept more refugees for resettlement, Ms. Ogata has said that such changes will take a long time, admitting, "[Y]ou should always look at Japan in a medium-term perspective -- at least 5 or 10 years."[3]

Refugees in Japan

By the end of 1990 roughly 7,200 Indochinese refugees had been resettled permanently in Japan. (Nearly all refugees accepted for resettlement in Japan have been from Indochina.) Among them are boat people landing in Japan, refugees from first-asylum camps in neighboring countries and persons leaving Vietnam under the UNHCR-sponsored Orderly Departure Program. In 1990 Japan granted permanent residence or asylum to 738 refugees, nearly all from Vietnam. Due to a 10-year residency requirement for citizenship, only about 100 refugees have become Japanese citizens, although that number is expected to increase with time.

A Surge in 1989 - In the decade before 1989 the number of refugees arriving in Japan rarely exceeded more than a few hundred a year. In 1989, however, the number of boat people arriving in Japan reached a record 3,498, more than double the number who came in 1980, the last record year. Moreover, in 1989 more than 2,800 of these refugees landed directly in Japan, in contrast to previous years when arrivals all had been rescued at sea. By yearend 1989 more than 2,100 Vietnamese refugees and asylum-seekers remained in Japan, awaiting resettlement there or in third countries. By the end of last year, according to the Department of State, the number of unsettled Vietnamese had been whittled

[3]Steven Weisman, "U.N. Choice: A Signal of a Bigger Role for Japan," New York Times, December 27, 1990, p. A3.

down to 822. Japan permanently resettled 461 refugees in 1989; 330 were from Vietnam, with the rest from Laos and Cambodia (see Table 2).

Table 2: Refugees Resettled and Persons Granted Asylum in Major Resettlement Countries

		1988	1989
Australia		10,301	11,663
Austria		1,785	2,070
Canada		28,588	35,000
Denmark		2,196	NA
Finland		312	424
France		8,794	8,711
West Germany		7,621	5,991
Japan		500	461
Netherlands		2,301	2,755
New Zealand		931	802
Norway		1,350	7,450
Spain		3,938	3,677
Sweden		17,601	23,961
Switzerland		680	821
United Kingdom	(est.)	1,000	1,587
Total		87,898	105,373
United States (fiscal year)		83,420	106,250

Source: Department of State, World Refugee Report, September 1990.

The rush of refugees into Japan in 1989 largely reflected new refugee policies in neighboring countries. In 1988 Thailand had begun to turn away Vietnamese asylum-seekers. The next year Malaysia initiated a policy of denying first asylum to large numbers of boat people, and South Korea closed its doors to most Indochinese refugees. Furthermore, asylum-seekers may have been trying to make their move before implementation of a June 1989 recommendation by the International Conference on Indochinese Refugees that refugees be screened more diligently.

Comprehensive Plan of Action - The more than 50 nations participating in the 1989 International Conference on Indochinese Refugees adopted a multilateral framework to address the crisis presented by a flood of Vietnamese refugees with fewer and fewer places to go. The Comprehensive Plan of Action called for recipient nations to determine the status of arriving refugees as well as protect and resettle asylum-seekers. Moreover, the plan set out voluntary repatriation programs. Japan, a party to the CPA, last year announced a contribution of roughly $13 million to support activities under the plan.

The CPA's recommendation of repatriation for those persons denied refugee status also emphasized that every effort should be made to encourage a voluntary return to the country of origin. In late 1989, however, several parties

to the plan began to press for involuntary repatriation for persons judged to be seeking better economic conditions rather than political asylum. While the United States has argued that sufficient time is necessary to prove the effectiveness of voluntary repatriation, the issue remains a topic of discussion among many first-asylum countries in Southeast Asia.

Naoki Tanaka, parliamentary vice minister of foreign affairs, told the 1989 conference on refugees that "voluntary repatriation must be the major key to a lasting solution to the refugee problem." He added, however, that if the exodus of refugees continued to overwhelm the small numbers willing to return to their home countries, "It will be necessary to seek alternatives to voluntary repatriation immediately." Foreign Ministry sources say that Tokyo currently sees a need for involuntary repatriation, although the Japanese government generally does not force those denied asylum to return to their country of origin. In September 1989 Japan established a process for screening refugees in conformity with the CPA. Tokyo has not implemented the system, however, on the basis that no international agreement exists on how to handle people refused asylum.

Resettlement Efforts in Japan - With fewer destinations open to them, more Vietnamese boat people and the brokers who organized their passage began to look to Japan. Although resettlement centers were established in Japan as early as 1979, the country was unprepared for the flood of people seeking asylum in the late 1980s. Refugees in 1989 swamped the four public refugee facilities: the International Refugee Assistance Center in the Shinagawa area of Tokyo, the Omura Refugee Reception Center in Nagasaki prefecture, the Himeji Resettlement Promotion Center in Hyogo prefecture and the Yamato Resettlement Promotion Center in Kanagawa prefecture. Boat people arriving in Japan are directed to the Omura center where they meet with UNHCR officials, undergo medical checkups and receive training before going to the Shinagawa center or facilities operated by private organizations. The Shinagawa center generally shelters refugees anticipating settlement in third countries. Refugees from neighboring first-asylum countries seeking resettlement in Japan are directed to the Himeji and Yamato centers where they receive language education and "social adaptation training" as well as assistance in finding jobs and homes.

Many of the refugees arriving in Japan in 1989 hoped to settle there permanently, in contrast to previous years when Japan was viewed by most refugees as a temporary stopover. The 1989 influx also included more than 1,600 immigrants from the People's Republic of China posing as Vietnamese refugees, roughly 300 of whom were returned to China late that year. The arrival of illegal immigrants from China continues to present a dilemma for Japan.

At the 1989 summit meeting of the world's seven leading democracies Japan joined the other participating governments in signing a declaration promising to provide refuge to Chinese dissidents. However, implementation in Japan is questioned by some. Tokyo reportedly has been cautious about recognizing dissidents, citing concern that some Chinese students in the country might claim to be dissidents and try to work in Japan under the auspices of the agreement. The government does not have a policy of automatically renewing the visas of these Chinese students.

Japan's Efforts to Assist Refugees Overseas

Japan's refugee resettlement efforts have focused almost exclusively on Indochina. Its contributions to UNHCR, like its foreign aid, traditionally have

been directed to Southeast and South Asia. Recently, however, Tokyo has broadened the scope of its refugee cooperation. At a 1990 meeting of UNHCR's Executive Committee the head of the Japanese mission in Geneva noted that recent Japanese refugee assistance included $7.3 million for Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran, $1.3 million to aid Liberian refugees and $1 million to help repatriate Nicaraguan refugees. Japan also has directed aid to refugees in Africa, the Middle East and Latin America through such international organizations as IOM, UNBRO and FAO's World Food Program. The most visible example of Japan's extension of humanitarian aid outside Asia, however, is its recent assistance to refugees who have fled their homes due to the conflict in the Persian Gulf.

Aid to Refugees of the Persian Gulf War - In an April stop in Japan following a fact-finding mission to Iran, Iraq and Turkey, UNHCR Ogata said she intended "to plead for the Japanese government to give more aid" on behalf of the nearly 1 million Iraqi refugees in Iran and roughly 600,000 on the Turkish border. That month Tokyo announced more than $100 million in funding for international relief organizations assisting Iraqi refugees. It also said that over $2 million worth of food, medicine and other emergency materials had been delivered to refugees in Iran and Turkey. In addition, Japan sent three medical relief teams in April to help refugees in Iraqi border areas.

During the Persian Gulf War Japan pledged $22 million to the International Committee of the Red Cross and the U.N. Disaster Relief Coordinator's Office as well as $38 million for the startup costs of an UNDRO refugee relief and repatriation program for refugees in countries bordering Iraq. The March cease-fire led UNDRO to revise its relief plans for the region and issue new appeals for assistance to the international community. Japan's April pledge of $100 million included $17.5 million previously disbursed to UNDRO, making the additional contribution $82.5 million. In June IOM reported receiving $7.5 million from the Japanese government and roughly $1.9 million from other Japanese donors for its Gulf Emergency Program.

Tokyo also appears set to provide additional relief to refugees in Iraq. In late May Foreign Ministry spokesman Taizo Watanabe said that Japan would extend financial assistance worth $500 million to the Kurdish refugees. Details of this aid package have yet to be settled, however (see JEI Report No. 20B, May 24, 1991).

Outlook

UNHCR Ogata has emphasized her hope that Japan, in becoming an economic power, also could become a humanitarian power. She and other international observers suggest that Japan could follow several routes toward greater leadership in resolving the worldwide refugee problem. They also caution that some paths may be difficult for Tokyo to pursue. The new UNHCR has noted, for example, that Japan may be slow to accept a greater resettlement burden; others concur that it could be politically difficult to boost Japan's cooperation in this area. Most relief experts agree, however, that Japan needs to contribute more than financial assistance.

In the political arena Japan has emphasized the importance of stemming the flow of refugees and has made a concerted effort to help settle one significant source -- the 12-year-long war in Cambodia. Tokyo also has urged the government of Vietnam to take actions aimed at halting clandestine departures.

UNHCR Ogata has suggested that Tokyo also will target the roots of refugee crises through its new guidelines for foreign aid, announced by Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu in April. The guidelines call on the government to consider a recipient nation's policies in such areas as human rights and promotion of democracy (see JEI Report No. 16B, April 26, 1991).

In the area of personnel contributions Ms. Ogata has proposed that Japan work on developing relief experts. Some observers suggest that Tokyo needs to develop a better system for coordinating Japanese citizens interested in such work. On a broader level Foreign Minister Taro Nakayama has characterized Japan's response to international humanitarian crises as insufficient and recommended that Japan seek an appropriate model overseas. UNHCR Ogata has suggested that Tokyo study the approach of Scandanavian governments to refugee relief.

While the level of Japanese awareness of refugee issues is said to be high, the escalating refugee population and growing signs of "compassion fatigue" in other nations are likely to challenge Japan to take additional steps at home and overseas to address the problem. The likely focus will not be just financial aid but political involvement and personnel commitments as well.

For further information, contact Margo Grimm.

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The views expressed in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the Japan Economic Institute.

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